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**The Southern Military Tradition:  
Sociodemographic Factors, Cultural Legacy, and United States Army Enlistments**

Adam J. Maley & Daniel N. Hawkins  
University of Nebraska Omaha

## **The Southern Military Tradition: Sociodemographic Factors, Cultural Legacy, and United States Army Enlistments**

### **Abstract**

Throughout the history of the United States, the South has had higher levels of military service than other regions of the country. Scholars regularly refer to this phenomenon as a “Southern military tradition.” The reasons behind this overrepresentation are not completely understood. Do Southern sociodemographic characteristics make it a preferred recruiting area relative to other regions in the United States, or is there something distinctive about the cultural legacy of Southern history that encourages and supports military service? Using a unique data set that includes county-level active duty army enlistments and sociodemographic information, we show that Southern counties have significantly higher enlistment rates than counties in the Northeast and Midwest. These differences disappear when sociodemographic factors, such as fewer college graduates and a prominent presence of Evangelical Christians, are taken into account. These findings suggest that population characteristics may be a stronger driver of current regional disparities in military service than an inherited Southern military tradition.

A particularly noticeable feature stands out to those who come in contact with United States military members: they tend to speak with a Southern accent (Marsman, 2009), a recruiting phenomenon referred to as the “Southern military tradition” (Quill, 1977; Segal & Segal, 2004; Kane, 2005; Watkins & Sherk, 2008). In fact, the overrepresentation of Southerners in the military has been steadily increasing in recent decades (see Figure 1). What is it about the South that compels so many of its youth towards military service?

**[Figure 1 about here]**

There are two major potential explanations for the Southern military tradition. The first is that sociodemographic factors drive the phenomenon; the South presently has population and cultural characteristics that are associated with a higher propensity to enlist in the military, such as a greater proportion of youth and minorities, lower levels of college-educated citizens, a fervent religious base, and a robust military presence. The other explanation is historical, rooted in a cultural military tradition in the South that stretches back before the Civil War, but that may continue into the present. To examine these possibilities, we created a unique county-level data set that combines U.S. Census data with information on religious congregations, military veteran residence, and active duty army enlistments. This data set allows us to address whether, after accounting for current sociodemographic factors, the South still has higher levels of enlistment than other regions of the country. If there is regional variance left unexplained by the sociodemographic predictors, this “residual model” points to the likelihood that a unique Southern cultural legacy may play a role in encouraging military enlistment. To our knowledge, no study has directly investigated explanations for the Southern military tradition using quantitative data.

## **Background**

### **Military Propensity**

Much of the research on military recruitment focuses on the *propensity* for military service. Potential recruits are considered “propensed” when they indicate that they will “definitely” or “probably” join the military in a designated time period, usually within the next year. Since military enlistment is greater in the South than any other region, and propensity is a strong predictor of service, it is no surprise that military propensity is also strongest in the South (Carvalho, Krulikowski, & Marsh, 2011; Wilson, Greenlees, Hagerty, & Hintze, 2000).

Motivations to join the military are affected by normative pressures that relate to characteristics of both individuals and their environments (Sackett & Mavor, 2003). These normative pressures, or societal sentiments about the military and military service, can be classified as either *descriptive* or *injunctive* norms. Descriptive norms “refer to perceptions of how many of one’s peers are pursuing the choice option in question,” while injunctive norms “reflect whether important others approve or disapprove of the individual’s enlisting” (Sackett & Mavor, 2004:22-23). Descriptive norms can be attributed to individual factors, such as age, race, and income levels, whereas injunctive norms relate to family and local influencers regarding education and religion, for example.

The process of enlistment occurs at the individual-level with regard to propensity and evaluation of fitness for service, so by using county-level data, we are aware of the danger of committing an ecological fallacy. Nevertheless, the descriptive and injunctive norms described above do operate within a group dynamic, not just among isolated individuals. Further, military recruiters are clearly wise to target geographic areas with high levels of military propensity. Therefore, from a descriptive norms standpoint, a higher proportion of recruits should come from geographic areas with sociodemographic profiles that better match a likelihood of service, such as

in the South. In regard to injunctive norms, regional differences in both the opportunity structure and in the culture will be important factors to explore.

### **Sociodemographics in the Southern States**

The overrepresentation of Southerners in the All Voluntary Force (AVF) has largely been attributed to three factors: age structure, racial composition, and a military-institutional presence (i.e., active military bases and an active military population). We also consider other sociodemographic factors that address the opportunity structure of localities, such as urbanization and socioeconomic status, which may affect recruiting and enlistment. We reserve the discussion of a military-institutional presence for a later part of this subsection, and focus first on age structure, racial composition, and opportunity structure. First, researchers have shown that more than 85 percent of recruits throughout the AVF are between the ages of 18-24 years old (Sackett & Mavor, 2003; Sellman, 2004), and U.S. population trends demonstrate how the South contains a larger proportion of military-aged youth compared to other regions (DOD, 2010; Segal & Segal, 2004). Second, research suggests non-whites are more likely than whites to volunteer for military service (Carvalho et al., 2011; Moskos & Butler, 1996; Orvis, Sastry, & McDonald, 1996), and a larger proportion of the South categorizes itself as black or Hispanic compared to other regions (Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000; United States Army Recruiting Command [USAREC], 2010; Wilson et al., 2000).

In regard to opportunity structure, the South is less developed and less urbanized than much of the United States; however, it is not clear how that might be related to military enlistment. On one hand, young people from rural areas may have fewer opportunities than those in cities, thereby making the military a more attractive option (Kane, 2005:12; Segal & Segal, 2004:7). On the other hand, military recruiters will by and large operate in more densely populated areas, making

urban areas a more likely source of recruits (Kane, 2005; Lowther, 2010; Warner, Simon, & Payne, 2003). More clearly, differences in educational attainment should play a role in military propensity, as the South has both a lower proportion of residents with a college degree and a higher proportion of residents without a high school degree. The greater opportunity to earn a college education in other regions of the country should result in less enlistment in those regions (Kilburn & Klerman, 1999:57-58; Bachman et al., 2000:16); however, there is a countervailing effect on the other end of the educational spectrum, as lacking a high school degree generally disqualifies one from military service. Lower levels of household income in the South also suggest that a higher proportion of residents, particularly youth, might seek the stable salary and benefits offered by the military (Kane, 2005).

In addressing a military-institutional presence, the local residency of military veterans is a key factor to consider. On one hand, the presence of veterans could partially serve as a proxy for the institutional military presence mentioned above, as veterans might choose to settle in communities with bases and other resources for former military members (e.g., VA health facilities, community-based service and nonprofit organizations, etc.). More veterans may simply reflect a stronger pro-military culture in that area. On the other hand, a large presence of military veterans may directly or indirectly increase the level of military propensity in their communities. In a direct way, veteran family members, educators, and community leaders may serve as positive mentors for youth who are considering military service. From an indirect perspective, following Granovetter's (1973) strength of weak ties hypothesis, a density of veterans could influence a wide array of potential recruits in the area through social networks. Warner and colleagues (2003) have provided evidence supporting this hypothesis, using elasticity models to show that a decline in the veteran population is strongly associated with a decline in military enlistments.

A final sociodemographic and cultural factor to consider is religious adherence, particularly the higher rates of Evangelical Protestants in the South and their potentially greater propensity for military service. DeFronzo and Gill (2008) note that “conservative Protestant beliefs...are more supportive of state-supported violence...[and] conservative Protestant culture supports higher tolerance of violence than do other religious belief systems in certain circumstances, such as in defense of honor or family” (2008:5). Citing 2003 findings from a Pew research poll, Barnwell (2006) provides evidence for this assertion, suggesting that leaders of white Evangelical churches are more likely to promote pro-war messages than those in Catholic or black Protestant churches. Lindsay (2007) suggests that the “evangelical ethos” started during the U.S. transition to an AVF and recognizes two key factors: military recruiting patterns across the U.S. and evangelical dogma. During a 2005 interview with the Deputy Secretary of Defense (1997-2000) John Hamre, Lindsay (2007) provides the following quote:

When we shifted...to an all-volunteer force, [the military pulled] increasingly from a segment of society that had strong cultural affinity to the military lifestyle and the values that are enshrined in the military community. So over the last 25 years, the military has become far more evangelical [as well as] more Southern, more rural, more conservative. (p. 165).

Burdette and colleagues (2009) provide evidence that these religious influences do in fact translate into military enlistment behavior. Citing nationally-representative data from the 1994-2002 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), they showed that the odds of military enlistment for highly religious evangelicals was 37 percent higher than nonreligious youth and 31 percent higher than religious non-evangelicals.

### **A Cultural Legacy of Military Service**

If sociodemographic realities do not account for the higher levels of military enlistment in the South, a longstanding military tradition rooted in the cultural legacy of the South may provide the



needed explanation. Scholars suggest that this phenomenon predates the 1773 AVF and even the Civil War. One assessment suggests that a violent, military-oriented collective consciousness developed in the colonial era as a consequence of "constant vigilance" regarding American Indians and slaves (Bonner, 1955:80). The physical environment produced a need for military-style sentry patrols to guard against American Indians, while economic and legal factors also required thwarting escaping slaves. In fact, many of the military academies established in antebellum South were created to train local populations to deal with these issues (Quill, 1977:58-59). As a consequence, Southern males became accustomed to lifestyles very similar to that of a soldier (Bonner, 1955:84). Of course, the American frontier, regardless of region, was dominated by physical and economic conflict. The factor that most distinguishes the South from other pre-modern regions harkens back to the immigrant settlers that first moved to the Greater Appalachian areas of the U.S. or, as it was known then, the "back country."

Fischer (1989) notes four major waves of English-speaking immigrants to the U.S. between 1629 to 1775: the fourth major wave (1718-1775) saw Scots-Irish peoples from the English "border countries" of Scotland, Ireland, and Northern England moving to the back country portions of early America. The American back country "extend[ed] 800 miles south from Pennsylvania to Georgia, and several hundred miles west from the Piedmont plateau to the banks of the Mississippi" (1989:638). Along with the Puritans, Cavaliers, and Quakers, the Scots-Irish settlers brought cultural toolkits for survival, as well as their own unique folkways; unlike the first three waves, Scots-Irish folkways were well adapted to the rugged terrain and harsh living conditions found in the back country. The traditional, Scots-Irish folkways that began in the border countries (homeland) and carried over to the American back country (new land) reflect a primary theme: the regular pattern of violence that shaped the Scots-Irish experience.

The violence that defined Scots-Irish folkways originates in essentially two forms: macro-conflict and micro-conflict. The formal monarchies of England (and sometimes Scotland) sought to settle and colonize local populations of the border countries. Bolstered by religious militancy and home-court advantage, the Scots-Irish lineage "was stained by centuries of continuous warfare along the border between England and Scotland, and then in the bitter settlements of England's Ulster Plantation in Northern Ireland" (Webb, 2004:9). The notion of conflict on a macro-scale invariably leads to conflict on a micro-scale. As the patterns of strife continued, "[e]ndemic violence shaped the culture of this region in many other ways – in attitudes toward work, sport, time, land, wealth, rank, inheritance, marriage and gender" (Fischer, 1989:629). These conflict-based folkways were carried with the Scots-Irish immigrants into the New World. According to Webb (2004):

This people [the Scots-Irish] gave our country great things, including its most definitive culture...It is imbued with a unique and unforgiving code of personal honor, less ritualized but every bit as powerful as the samurai code. Its legacy is broad, in many ways defining the attitudes and values of the military, of working-class America, and even of the peculiarly populist form of American democracy itself. (p. 8).

Fischer (1989) further suggests that a Southern military tradition was institutionalized in the South, at least more so than any other region of the U.S. According to this view, the persistence of a violent and militaristic tradition is a matter of culture. Other scholars have found evidence of Southern violent traditions that speak to a lingering Scots-Irish cultural presence as it relates to gender (D'Antonio-Del Rio, Doucet, & Chauvin, 2010) and race (Lee, Thomas, & Ousey, 2010; Nteta & Tarsi, 2016). Furthermore, there are numerous examples of politicians "playing up the Scots-Irish vote" by referencing personal honor, military service, and "working class American values" (Ireland, 2012:266). Given that the cultural legacy of the Southern military tradition originated in the Appalachian South, while the institutional presence of the military predominates

in the non-Appalachian South, it is critical to also test for differences between these two sub-regions after examining the whole South in comparison to non-Southern geographic regions.

Of course, support for the military as an institution could be tied to *current* structural and cultural conditions in the South as much as to a historical legacy of militarism. The South contains a long-standing institutional military presence (Bonner, 1955; Kleykamp, 2006). There are more military bases in the South than in any other region, and these military bases are often economic drivers in the regions they are located. At least in part due to a relative lack of economic and educational opportunities in much of the still underdeveloped South, as discussed above, the decision to join the military is viewed favorably as a sound life choice and a potential way out of poverty. Furthermore, a greater density of military recruiters and recruiting resources are tied to the bases, increasing the likelihood of successful enlistments (Marsman, 2009). Over time, these attributes culminated in a pro-military service culture, one that regards the military service member with high esteem (Bonner, 1955:84). While the sociodemographic factors examined in this study clearly address some these structural and cultural conditions, residual differences in enlistments could potentially be attributed to present day Southern culture rather than a historical legacy of military service. Nevertheless, the culture of the modern South has certainly been shaped in part by historical factors, including the military tradition we have described.

## **Method**

### **Data**

We created a unique county-level data set from multiple sources that combined the number of army enlistees for 2005 with sociodemographic information on sex, age, race, urbanization, education, income, military veterans, and religious adherence. The completed data set, which also included each county's geographic region, consisted of 3,131 United States counties. It is

important to keep in mind that the data are reflective of county-level population characteristics from which recruits are drawn, and not necessarily of the individual characteristics of recruits themselves. The specific data source for each measure is detailed below in the description of variables.

## **Variables**

**Army enlistments.** The dependent variable was based on population figures for NPS active duty army enlistments collected by the National Priorities Project (NPP), obtained through a Freedom of Information request to the Department of Defense (National Priorities Project, 2012). These figures represented all non-prior service (NPS) enlistments in the U.S. Army in 2005 in each county included in the data set. In all analyses, we used an *army enlistment rate* per 1,000 county residents (based on 2000 U.S. Census data).

The 2005 recruiting year represented a potentially advantageous time to examine military recruiting. Since the United States Armed Forces began operations in Gulf War II—starting with the 2003 buildup of coalition forces in Kuwait—2005 was the only year the military missed its annual recruiting goal, falling 6,193 enlistments short (DOD, 2010b). The active duty army fully accounted for the shortfall in enlistments, achieving only 92% of its recruiting goal (DOD, 2010b). Therefore, 2005 may represent an important time of transition for the Army as it moved from peacetime to wartime recruiting, a change to which it apparently adjusted by meeting its recruiting goals in subsequent years. For example, the intense combat that had become well-publicized by this time may have discouraged more privileged youth, who may have multiple educational and career choices outside the military, from beginning the enlistment process. As a result, the Army substantially lowered its standards in regard to educational attainment and prior criminal

convictions (CITATION). Nevertheless, by using 2005 enlistment data, we are able to test for the Southern military tradition at the intersection of two potentially distinct recruiting eras.

**Geographic region.** The central independent variable was a set of dummy variables that assessed the geographic region of each county. In the first set of analyses, the dummy variables were based on the basic U.S. Census (2000) regions of *Northeast*, *Midwest*, *West*, and *South* (reference group). In the second set of analyses, Northeast, Midwest, and West remained as categories, but the U.S. Census region South was split into two distinct sub-regions, *Appalachian-South* (reference group) and *Non-Appalachian-South*, based on county-level classifications by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (2004; see Appendix A). According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the Appalachian distinction was based on “economic characteristics, such as the industrial composition of the labor force, and in terms of demographic, social, and cultural characteristics.” It should be noted that both Appalachian and Non-Appalachian counties could be located in the same Southern state. In addition, although some Appalachian counties were located in the Northeast and Midwest, they are not specially designated as such; instead, they received the same Northeast or Midwest categorization as the Non-Appalachian counties in those regions.

**Sociodemographic factors.** To measure sociodemographic variables that may account for regional differences in army enlistments, we began with information from the 2000 U.S. Census (Summary Files 1 and 3) for sex/age, race/ethnicity, population density, education, and income. With the exception of income, all demographic variables that follow were measured as proportions in each county. Sex/age was assessed by the proportion of *males 17 to 24* years old in a county, which represented 91 percent of the primary cohort for recruiting non-prior service members (DOD, 2005). Variation in race/ethnicity was measured by the proportion of county residents who identified as non-Hispanic *white*, non-Hispanic *black*, and *Hispanic* (of any race). Population

density was reported as the proportion of housing units that resided within an *urban* area, meaning the population density was at least 1,000 per square mile (Census, 2000a:1017). The measure of education included two separate variables that assessed opposites ends of the educational spectrum. *College degree* was the proportion of adults aged 25 and over that have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, per the total number of adults aged 25 and over; *no high school degree* was the proportion of adults aged 18 and over that do not have a high school degree or a G.E.D., per total number of adults aged 18 and over. *Household income* was reported as a county mean (in \$1,000) for all income-earning households. *Population size* was logged to account for the skewed nature of the variable when included in the regression models.

Religious adherence information was taken from the "Religious Congregations and Membership Study," collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (Association of Religious Data Archives [ARDA], 2012; Jones et al. 2002). Religious adherence was reported as the proportion of *Mainline Protestant*, *Evangelical Protestant*, and *Catholic* members per the total population. This proportion was based on an "adjusted" rate, "including full members, their children, and the estimated number of other participants" (ARDA, 2012; Finke & Scheitle, 2005:7). The distinction between Mainline and Evangelical Protestants was based on the classification scheme of Jones et al. (2002), which stemmed from Steensland and colleagues' (2000) "emphasis on classifying American religious groups by affiliation rather than ideology" (297).

Military veteran information was taken from the "VetPop2007" dataset, collected by the National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS). This variable was reported as the proportion of *military veterans* living in 2005, per total county population aged 18 and over (NCVAS, 2007).

## **Analytic Strategy**

We began by addressing the question of whether the South is overrepresented in army enlistments in our 2005 data set. First, we aggregated the county-level data to produce overall regional (and sub-regional) enlistment rates. Second, we calculated descriptive statistics for enlistment rates and all the independent variables in the study based on the *average* county within each region and sub-region. We also conducted ANOVA tests to determine whether significant mean differences existed in each variable across the regions.

We then progressed to OLS regression analyses, which allowed us to determine whether the South was overrepresented in army enlistments, net of relevant sociodemographic factors. We estimated two separate regressions. The first regression used the regional designations of Northeast, Midwest, and West, with South as the reference category. The second regression was identical to the first, with the exception that South was divided into the sub-regions of Appalachian South (reference category) and Non-Appalachian South. Within each regression table, the first model included only the regional dummy variables as predictors; the second model added all the sociodemographic variables to examine whether they change the “bivariate” associations in the first model. All models also controlled for the logged population of each county to address population size effects that would be hidden by using rates.

It was possible that the sociodemographic variables had varying effects on enlistment rates across the different cultural contexts of each region. To examine this possibility, we tested several regression models with interaction terms created by multiplying the sociodemographic variables by the regional dummy variables. These models produced very few significant or substantial results, suggesting that the sociodemographic effects are essentially uniform across geographic region. We do not report these results here, although they are available from the authors upon

request. We also tested a regression model that designated the whole of Appalachia as its own region with comparisons to the other four “Non-Appalachian” regions. The results were remarkably similar to those shown in Table 3, providing evidence for the robustness of our findings. Since our focus was explicitly on the differences between the South and other regions, we do not show that regression table here, but these results are also available upon request for interested readers.

## Results

Figure 2 shows the rate of army enlistments per 1,000 residents from the 2005 NPS enlistment data for seven geographical areas: the whole United States, four regions (Northeast, Midwest, West, and South), and two sub-regions (Appalachian South and Non-Appalachian South). These rates were calculated by aggregating the data across counties and therefore reflect the overall enlistment rates for each geographical area. The figure reveals clearly that the South had the highest rate of enlistment of any region, with a rate that was nearly 22% higher than the rate of the United States as a whole. Further, both sub-regions of the South had higher rates of enlistment than the Northeast, Midwest, or West, with the Non-Appalachian South showing the highest rate of any geographical area.

### [Figure 2 about here]

Unlike Figure 2, Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the *average* county within each geographical area rather than each area as a whole. Still, the first row of the table (*Army Enlistments*) confirms the patterns seen in Figure 2: Southern counties had the highest average enlistment rate compared to counties in any other region, although the difference between Southern and Western counties was minimal. At nearly .3 enlistments per 1,000 residents, the Non-Appalachian South had the highest enlistment rate of any geographical area in the table. The



descriptive statistics for the independent variables in the table also conform to expectations, with Southern counties having the highest proportions of racial minorities and Evangelical Protestants, along with the lowest levels of education and household incomes. The *F*-tests column of the table reveals significant differences in means for all variables across the four regions (Northeast, Midwest, West, and South).

**[Table 1 about here]**

Table 2 is a county-level regression of enlistment rates on region, with South as the reference group. Model 1, which controls for county population size, reveals that Southern counties had significantly higher enlistment rates than Northeastern and Midwestern counties, but no difference in rates compared to Western counties. When the entire set of independent variables is added in Model 2, nearly 12% of additional variance in enlistments was explained, and the significant differences across regions disappeared. After including sociodemographic factors, Southern counties had enlistment rates that were not significantly higher than those in the Northeast, Midwest, or West. Instead, counties with a larger proportion of Whites and residents with college degrees and without high school degrees had significantly lower rates of enlistment. There was a positive association between the proportions of young adult males, Evangelical Protestants, and military veterans and enlistment rates. According to the standardized coefficients in the model, the proportion of males age 17-24 and veterans were particularly strong predictors relative to other variables in the model, although supplementary analyses (not shown) revealed that the education and religion variables were most responsible for reducing the differences in enlistment rates across regions to non-significance.

**[Table 2 about here]**

Table 3 is identical to the analysis reported in Table 2, with the exception of the South being divided into two sub-regions—Appalachian South and Non-Appalachian South—with the former serving as the reference group. Model 1 shows that counties in the Appalachian South had significantly lower enlistment rates than counties in the Midwest, West, and Non-Appalachian South, and this model explained more variance in the dependent variable (2.5%) than did Model 1 of Table 1 (1.5%). When the other independent variables were added in Model 2, the significant differences between Appalachian Southern counties and those in the Midwest and West disappeared. The significant difference between counties in the Appalachian and the Non-Appalachian South remained, although it was reduced in magnitude by half. The sociodemographic variables explained nearly 11% more variance in enlistments over and above what was accounted for by the regional variables. Supplementary analyses (not shown) for this regression revealed that the addition of the military veteran variable to the model was largely responsible for shrinking the regional regression coefficients. Additional supplementary analyses that used the Non-Appalachian South as the reference group indicated that counties in this sub-region had higher enlistment rates than counties in the Northeast ( $b = -.100, p < .001$ ) and the Midwest ( $b = -.038, p < .001$ ), but not the West ( $b = -.015, p = .161$ ); however, these differences were no longer significant after including the sociodemographic predictors in a second model.

**[Table 3 about here]**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept known as the Southern military tradition. The facts surrounding this tradition are simple enough: whether in times of peace or conflict, the South has higher levels of recruitment than other regions of the country. The reasons behind this overrepresentation of Southerners in the armed forces are much less understood. Do the

demographics of the South make it a preferred recruiting area relative to other regions in the United States, or is there something unique about Southern culture that encourages and supports military service? Using an original data set that includes active duty army enlistments and county-level demographic information, we showed that Southern counties had significantly higher enlistment rates than counties in the Northeast and Midwest. These differences disappeared when current sociodemographic factors were taken into account, suggesting that rather than a militaristic cultural legacy, it was factors such as fewer college graduates and a prominent presence of Evangelical Christians that most drive enlistment in Southern counties. Unexpectedly, the Appalachian South region, where we might most expect to find a historic military tradition based in Scots-Irish heritage, provided fewer army recruits than the Midwest and West, before taking into account sociodemographic factors. Instead, it was the non-Appalachian South that had the highest rates of enlistment, particularly when compared to the Appalachian South.

### **Sociodemographic Factors or Cultural Legacy?**

The results from the first set of regression models clearly suggest that sociodemographic differences fully accounted for the enlistment discrepancies in 2005 between the South and other regions of the country. Variation in age-gender composition, racial-ethnic composition, and education levels played a substantial and significant role in explaining away variation in enlistment rates. First, compared to the North and Midwest in particular, the South contains a slightly but significantly higher proportion of young adult males per county. This demographic group has the strongest propensity toward military service, which in turn results in higher enlistment levels in Southern counties. Second, our results show a negative relationship between the proportion of whites and the rate of army enlistments, and correspondingly, Southern counties had significantly lower proportions of white residents compared to counties in other regions. This finding supports

past research that demonstrates lower levels of military propensity for whites (Carvalho, Turner, & Marsh, 2008), particularly among youth (Segal, Freedman-Doan, Bachman, & O'Malley et. al, 2001; Teachman, Call, & Segal, 1993; Wilson et. al, 2000). The fact that neither the proportion of black or Hispanic residents was significantly related to enlistment may reflect ongoing changes that point to a slowly declining black propensity in conjunction with an increasing Hispanic propensity (Carvalho et. al, 2011; Orvis et. al, 1996; Kilburn & Klerman, 1999).

Finally, education was negatively related to army enlistments at both the high and low ends of the education spectrum; both a higher proportion of residents with college degrees *and* a higher proportion without high school degrees were found in counties with lower enlistment rates. The findings concerning the college educated confirms past studies, which have also shown that higher levels of college attendance, greater individual measures of grand point average and educational aspirations, and even parents' education level tend to be negatively associated with enlistment (Bachman, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2001; Kilburn & Klerman, 1999, Kleykamp, 2006; Warner et. al, 2001). As for the least educated counties, given the broad-based military enlistment criteria and the effort to recruit "high quality" prospects, it is no surprise that they produced lower enlistment rates. Interestingly, these educational effects remained strong despite the fact that the rate of army recruits with a high school diploma declined from 94 to 83.5 percent between 2003 and 2005. This decline in educational credentials coincided with a nearly seven-fold increase in the rate of Category IV recruits, those individuals whose aptitude scores are deemed the lowest allowable (Kaplan, 2008).

It should be noted that enlistment rates in Western counties did not differ significantly from those in Southern counties even before taking demographic variables into account. This makes sense in light of the West's rise in enlistments since the 1980s, which reflect larger shifts in the

U.S. population. Since the 1980s, there has been increasing “sunbelt growth” as Americans moved out of the Northeast and Midwest and into the South and West, helping to create a younger and more racially diverse cohort of potential recruits. Read another way, this finding of no difference could suggest that while the South’s military tradition may be rooted in a somewhat different and older history, it may not be completely unique when compared to the West. Nevertheless, these sociodemographic findings taken as a whole suggest that a substantial amount of the South’s overrepresentation in enlistment, at least compared to the Northeast and Midwest, is due to basic differences in sociodemographic representation and the opportunity structure across regions. Interestingly, there was no evidence that any of the sociodemographic variables operated differently across any of the regions. While it is impossible to completely separate the any region’s current culture from the historic factors that shaped it, this suggests that the cultural or historical context of these regions does not alter the basic effects of population characteristics on recruiting and enlistment.

### **Which South Has the Military Tradition?**

Our main theoretical argument regarding the Southern military tradition suggested that it is the remnants of longstanding cultural norms and folkways stemming from the Scots-Irish immigrants and their colonization of the Appalachian Mountain range. Accordingly, we expected that a collective militaristic conscience would have survived and thrived in the “back country” more so than other areas of the South, leading to higher rates of military propensity and enlistment. Yet, when we divided the South into two sub-regions based on an Appalachian or Non-Appalachian distinction, we found that the Appalachian South counties actually had *lower* rates of enlistment than counties in the Midwest, West, and Non-Appalachian South. After taking into account the host of sociodemographic factors, enlistment differences between the Appalachian South and the

Midwestern and Western regions disappeared; in contrast, the Non-Appalachian South still showed significantly higher enlistments than the Appalachian South in the presence of all other independent variables.

What explains this surprising set of findings? Sociodemographic factors are again a likely culprit in regard to the differences between the Appalachian South and the Midwest and West. First, counties in the Appalachian South had the lowest levels of education and generally lower proportions of racial minorities and military veterans residing within them, which accounted for a portion of the enlistment discrepancies. Second, and probably more importantly, the U.S. population has grown at twice the rate as it has in Appalachia over the past few decades (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2015). The low population density of Appalachian South counties likely makes them the most difficult for military recruiters to visit and navigate; the urban/rural designation that we use in the regression models likely accounts for only some of this population-based effect. Further, given a perceived lower likelihood of finding “high quality” recruits and the low population density issue, military recruiters may not invest heavily in this sub-region of the country. If so, the military would not be the first large social institution to neglect to provide equal opportunities in the nation’s most disadvantaged areas (Putnam, 2015).

The lack of recruiting effort described above would also explain some of the enlistment differences between the two Southern regions that remained even after sociodemographic variables are considered. As suggested previously in regard to the West, cultural legacy of military service may not be found solely in the Appalachian regions of the South. While Census estimates suggest that a large proportion of Scots-Irish remain in Appalachia (Lee et al., 2010), we also know that residents of the back country have spread throughout the South, likely carrying their norms and folkways with them. In combination with the potential of a shared and strong military tradition,

the more population dense, racially diverse, and highly educated non-Appalachian Southern counties may be viewed as a potential “gold mine” for military recruiters. The idea that these sociodemographic factors are the real driver of recruitment and enlistment is supported by our inability to find strong or consistent interaction effects in the regression models. Each region’s unique cultural context does not seem to alter the nature of the relationship between the sociodemographic predictors and army enlistment rates.

### **Veterans as Recruiters**

By far the strongest predictor of active army enlistment in 2005 was the proportion of military veterans residing in a county. This finding is fully consistent with previous enlistment studies that have captured the unique power of “veteran influencers” (Boyer & Schmitz, 1995; Schacherer, 2005; Warner et al., 2001). The presence of veterans may simultaneously capture both a sociodemographic and a cultural dynamic. The veteran population likely has direct and indirect effects on increasing enlistments through social networks, and these effects may differ in strength across different types of communities (NCVAS, 2010). At the same time, veterans tend to settle in areas with a strong institutional military presence, which are also more likely to have a pro-military culture (Warner et al., 2003). Regardless of the mechanism, the decline in the proportion of veterans across the U.S. suggests that military recruiting in the future may become more difficult.

That being said, counties in the South did not have a higher average proportion of military veterans than other regions of the country, particularly the West. Therefore, the presence of military veterans accounts for a smaller than expected portion of the differences in enlistment rates between Southern counties and those in the Northeast and Midwest. Instead, factors such as race, education, and religious adherence (discussed below) loom larger in explaining that difference.

Still, we should not overlook the role that veterans may play in the more densely populated areas of the South with high proportions of veterans and an institutional military presence. The larger proportion of veterans in counties in the non-Appalachian South compared to the Appalachian South did, in fact, account for much of the difference in enlistment rates between those two sub-regions.

### **The Evangelical Effect**

Counties with higher proportions of Evangelical Protestants consistently showed higher enlistment rates, whereas the proportions of Mainline Protestants and Catholics in a county had no significant effect on enlistment. Further, it is clear that the presence of Evangelical Protestants accounts for a good portion of the enlistment discrepancies between the South and other geographic regions. Of course, religious adherence is not a simple sociodemographic characteristic, and the “tone and character of conservative Protestantism” in particular may have a strong cultural influence throughout the South (Ellison, 2003:342). In regard to pro-militarism in particular, there is ample evidence that Evangelical Protestantism provides community and individual support and justification for some types of war, violence, and defense of honor (Barnwell, 2006; DeFronzo & Gill, 2008). The perceived underlying religious nature of the United States’ recent and current wars in the Middle East may also play into this phenomenon. It is possible that Evangelical Christianity has actually absorbed some of the Scots-Irish folkways most associated with a military tradition, which explains why it so substantially reduces the effect of region in our regression models. Yet, while nearly two thirds of American Evangelicals reside in the South (ARDA, 2012), it is important to keep in mind that the “Evangelical effect” is present across all regions of the country. This indicates that any counties with high proportions of conservative Protestants may be particularly fertile recruiting grounds.



It is likely that the greater proportion of enlistments from strongly Evangelical counties reflects the higher likelihood that recruits and their families adhere to an Evangelical Christian identity themselves. If this is the case, there may be cause for concern when these soldiers return home after deployment. A recent study of religious beliefs and mental illness showed that “Evangelical Christians endorsed more beliefs that mental illness has spiritual causes and treatments than Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians” (Wessellman, 2015:172). Given the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental health issues among returning veterans, the notion that a relatively large proportion of those in need would not have support for seeking professional assistance is worrisome.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations to this study that should be addressed. First, military enlistment is ultimately an individual-level process, and our study relies on county-level data. We are aware of the risk of committing the ecological fallacy and have attempted to avoid generalizing from aggregate trends to individual behavior. Future studies should use both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how recruiting and enlistment decisions are made by individuals, particularly in the context of community and regional characteristics. Nevertheless, past research suggests that community and cultural factors do directly affect military recruitment and enlistment at the aggregate level, so our data are appropriate for addressing our central question of how the Southern military tradition is shaped. Second, the data used in this study come from only one year of enlistments within a single branch of military service. The 2005 army enlistment data were particularly interesting because of the recruiting difficulties faced and potential strategic recruiting implemented that year. Still, future studies should examine these trends longitudinally and include enlistment data from other branches of the armed forces. In particular, there may be meaningful

differences in the recruiting and enlistment processes within the Navy, Air Force, or Marines that are not captured by our Army-only enlistment data. Finally, our models may not have included all the relevant economic factors related to army recruitment shortfalls in 2005. For example, Bicksler and Nolan (2009) note that the decrease in civilian unemployment just before this time may have helped create a tighter recruiting market, and further, the market competition may vary by region. Interestingly enough, however, when military veteran presence has been included alongside economic factors, the predictive power of economic forces either disappeared or decreased significantly (Boyer & Schmitz, 1995; Schacherer, 2005). We included measures such as poverty rate and unemployment rate in earlier models, and they had little effect on county-level enlistment rates or the difference in those rates across regions.

## **Conclusion**

Our study contributes to the literature on military recruiting and enlistment by assessing the possibility that a cultural legacy of military service accounts for the higher rates of army enlistments in the South relative to other geographic regions in the United States. This question is interesting in and of itself from sociological, cultural, and historical perspectives. But it is also important from a regional inequality standpoint, as the South seems to bear the brunt of the sacrifice and pain associated with military conflicts. After accounting for a wide array of sociodemographic characteristics in a county-level analysis, we did not find evidence of an unmeasured, freestanding, historical military tradition in the South. Instead, differences in age-gender composition, racial composition, and educational attainment across counties accounted for much of the South's higher enlistment rates. The prominence of Evangelical Protestantism throughout the region also played an important role. Future attempts to address the

overrepresentation of Southerners in the military will be aided by addressing the critical associated factors we have identified.

## Tables

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Average County by Region

	<u>United States</u>		<u>Northeast</u>		<u>Midwest</u>		<u>West</u>	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Enlistments	.269	(.191)	.211	(.119)	.257	(.187)	.282	(.231)
Males 17-24	.055	(.018)	.052	(.014)	.053	(.018)	.055	(.018)
White	.813	(.191)	.886	(.136)	.923	(.105)	.762	(.212)
Black	.087	(.145)	.045	(.067)	.020	(.046)	.011	(.020)
Hispanic	.062	(.120)	.040	(.062)	.024	(.039)	.133	(.157)
Urban	.396	(.310)	.545	(.310)	.362	(.300)	.449	(.332)
College Degree	.165	(.078)	.223	(.089)	.161	(.063)	.202	(.089)
No HS Degree	.226	(.087)	.176	(.049)	.181	(.056)	.177	(.071)
Income (\$1,000)	44.276	(9.690)	52.977	(14.106)	43.873	(8.458)	45.243	(11.132)
Mainline Prot.	.142	(.113)	.134	(.068)	.224	(.139)	.066	(.064)
Evangelical Prot.	.227	(.169)	.042	(.032)	.170	(.106)	.098	(.066)
Catholic	.137	(.148)	.297	(.150)	.179	(.133)	.169	(.148)
Veteran	.129	(.030)	.124	(.027)	.129	(.021)	.146	(.037)
Pop. (1,000)	89.882	(292.912)	246.979	(366.289)	61.036	(214.014)	142.337	(555.642)
<i>N</i>	3131		217		1055		444	

Note: SD = standard deviation. The *F*-test in the final column is based on an ANOVA comparing means across Northeast, Midwest, West, and South.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 1 (continued).** Descriptive Statistics for Average County by Region

	<u>South</u>		<u>App South</u>		<u>Non-App South</u>		F-Test for Mean Differences
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Enlistments	.283	(.187)	.230	(.132)	.298	(.197)	<b>11.385***</b>
Males 17-24	.056	(.018)	.054	(.014)	.057	(.019)	<b>7.414***</b>
White	.736	(.197)	.897	(.127)	.690	(.189)	<b>270.567***</b>
Black	.168	(.180)	.072	(.123)	.195	(.184)	<b>359.518***</b>
Hispanic	.072	(.140)	.016	(.022)	.087	(.155)	<b>101.726***</b>
Urban	.381	(.302)	.268	(.251)	.414	(.308)	<b>27.007***</b>
College Degree	.148	(.074)	.124	(.057)	.155	(.077)	<b>107.202***</b>
No HS Degree	.283	(.082)	.316	(.079)	.274	(.080)	<b>558.649***</b>
Income (\$1,000)	42.938	(8.456)	40.637	(6.779)	43.597	(8.770)	<b>117.949***</b>
Mainline Prot.	.105	(.062)	.107	(.065)	.105	(.061)	<b>422.893***</b>
Evangelical Prot.	.339	(.167)	.338	(.167)	.339	(.167)	<b>702.175***</b>
Catholic	.072	(.125)	.020	(.034)	.087	(.137)	<b>235.544***</b>
Veteran	.126	(.033)	.118	(.024)	.128	(.034)	<b>54.554***</b>
Pop. (1,000)	70.839	(181.447)	45.493	(68.817)	78.097	(201.915)	<b>31.873***</b>
<i>N</i>	1415		315		1100		

**Table 2.** Regression of County Army Enlistments on Region (South as Reference Group)

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	SE	$\beta$	b	SE	$\beta$
Northeast	-.085***	.014	-.113	-.012	.017	-.016
Midwest	-.023**	.008	-.056	.004	.012	.011
West	.000	.01	.001	-.024	.014	-.043
Males 17-24	---	---	---	1.795***	.227	.168
White	---	---	---	-.111**	.040	-.111
Black	---	---	---	-.061	.047	-.047
Hispanic	---	---	---	.080	.050	.050
Urban	---	---	---	.018	.018	.029
College Degree	---	---	---	-.409***	.078	-.166
No HS Degree	---	---	---	-.278**	.085	-.127
Household Income (in \$1,000)	---	---	---	-.001	.001	-.055
Mainline Protestant	---	---	---	-.058	.038	-.034
Evangelical Protestant	---	---	---	.125***	.027	.111
Catholic	---	---	---	-.031	.029	-.024
Military Veteran	---	---	---	2.027***	.144	.321
Logged Population	.023***	.006	.073	.031**	.010	.099
Intercept	.182***	.026	---	.021	.078	---
$R^2$		.015			.140	

$N = 3,131$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

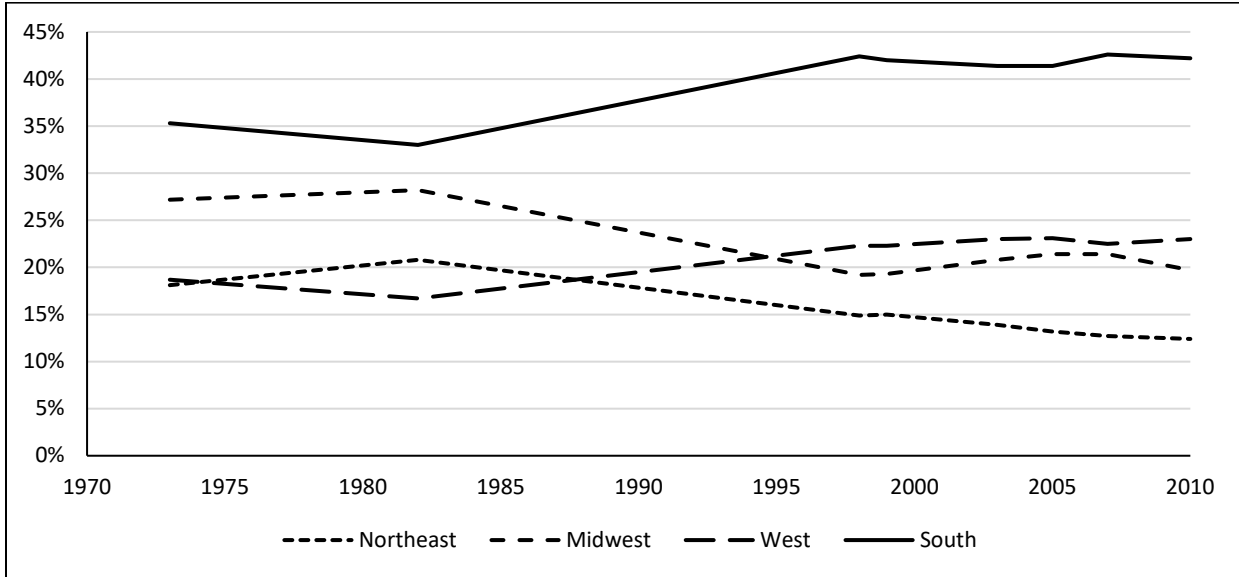
**Table 3.** Regression of County Army Enlistments on Region (Appalachian South as Reference Group)

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	SE	$\beta$	b	SE	$\beta$
Northeast	-.032	.017	-.043	.010	.019	.013
Midwest	.030*	.012	.075	.028	.015	.070
West	.053***	.014	.097	.004	.018	.007
Non-Appalachian South	.068***	.012	.170	.034*	.014	.084
Males 17-24	---	---	---	1.755***	.227	.165
White	---	---	---	-.098*	.040	-.098
Black	---	---	---	-.084	.048	-.064
Hispanic	---	---	---	.062	.050	.039
Urban	---	---	---	.016	.018	.025
College Degree	---	---	---	-.387***	.079	-.157
No HS Degree	---	---	---	-.224*	.088	-.102
Household Income (in \$1,000)	---	---	---	-.001*	.001	-.061
Mainline Protestant	---	---	---	-.058	.038	-.034
Evangelical Protestant	---	---	---	.114***	.028	.100
Catholic	---	---	---	-.037	.029	-.029
Military Veteran	---	---	---	1.972***	.145	.312
Logged Population	.023***	.006	.072	.034***	.010	.110
Intercept	.130***	.028	---	-.025	.081	---
$R^2$		.025			.142	

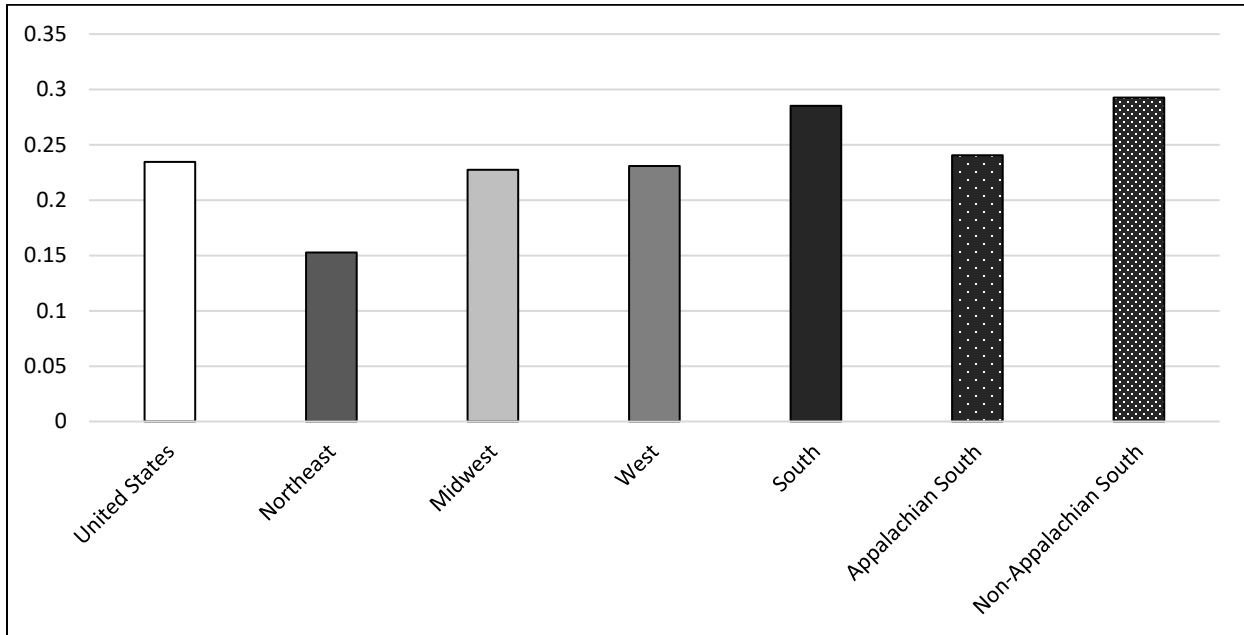
$N = 3,131$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Figures



**Figure 1.** Percentage of All Volunteer Force (AVF) army enlistments, non-prior service (NPS) active component accessions by region, FYs 1973-2010 (DOD, 2010:13).



**Figure 2.** Proportion of army enlistments, non-prior service (NPS) active component accessions (per 1,000 residents) by geographical region, FY 2005. Data aggregated across counties



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